THE LAW OF KARMA AND REINCARNATION

SRI SWAMI CHIDANANDA



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THE LAW OF KARMA AND REINCARNATION

(SRI SWAMI CHIDANANDA)

The subject of "Karma and reincarnation" is one that merits the careful consideration and the intelligent perusal of everyone, for herein lies an exposition of a law which governs our existence in this universe. People are often apt to make loose reference to this subject as "Indian theory of Karma" or "Hindu theory of reincarnation." This is a misnomer. It is not the evolution of a theory with which we are concerned, but

the revelation of a law. It is interesting to note that this law is not the special possession of the peoples of the East, but is at the very origin of all religions, and is commonly held by practically every religion of the world. Therefore, it is not a Hindu law, in the same sense that the law of gravity is not Newton's law. Newton has no claim upon the law. It did not belong to him. He was merely the one who observed its working and declared it. Similarly, the principle of Archimedes is not a Grecian law, nor a Greek invention. It did not commence working when Archimedes discovered it. It is eternally in operation. In the same way, the law of Karma and reincarnation did not have a beginning in the East. It is eternally in existence. Some Sage or Seer at a particular time in the history of

mankind realised it, or it revealed to him in deep meditation, and then he declared it to mankind.

The statement of this law is not a startling one, either. It does not require any special effort to be understood or accepted. Even now, this law is being recognised and accepted with deep conviction by great scientists, and it has been defined in terms which have been made familiar to everyone. According to their interpretation of the law, restricted to the plane of physical matter, every action has a corresponding reaction and every cause has an inevitable effect. Every chemist, every physicist, believes that this law operates in the external universe governing physical matter. This is the same law that was revealed to the Seers of India

long ago in the moral, ethical and spiritual plane. Just as in the world around us, we see that every cause has its inevitable effect, and that every action brings about a certain reaction, so in the same way in the moral and ethical realm, every cause brings about a certain effect. Every seed sown bears a particular fruit or yields a certain harvest. The simplest statement of the law of Karma is: 'As you sow, so shall you reap'. Interpreted by scientists and applied to physical matter, this law is: 'Every cause has an effect, and every action has a corresponding reaction'. To this, we have to add that every cause brings about an effect which, in its nature, tends to be similar to the nature of the cause which produces it. This is a highly logical postulate. There is a saying that the behaviour

of the individual accords with the mind and, conversely, the nature of the mind accords with the deeds he has done in the past.

Now, the working of this law was revealed in deep meditation to the Hindus long ago. One may ask: "Why should modern, advanced people of the twentieth century bother about this law? It may perhaps have been interesting to the Hindus centuries ago, but how can an ancient law have any practical bearing on the modern world? First of all, it is not a Hindu law. The Hindus had nothing to do with it. It is God's law. God created the laws that govern the universe and, also, it is not an ancient, out-moded law, no longer effective, but a universal law which is eternally effective.

Biologists discovered long ago that respiration is essential for physical life. Now one cannot say that this fact is of no further interest, just because the fact was brought to light long ago. Man cannot dispense with it. As long as he is a corporeal creature, breathing will sustain his physical life and oxygen will be necessary. If oxygen is denied, he will die. The law remains effective and concerns him vitally.

Man can only afford to snap his fingers at the law when he goes above this relative world into a realm in which the interplay of action and reaction is suspended. That realm is there.

However, there are certain misconceptions which have to be removed. One of them is that, since the law goes on

operating in man's, life, the necessity of guarding his own actions may be obviated. Since whatever happens, will happen in accordance with a law and is all inevitable, how can man act at all? This is not the proper context for the postulation of the question of free action. The actions of the human being, out of the very fact that he is allowed to act, cause the extension of his activities beyond. For, as one sows, so shall one reap. The very statement of the law recognises the agency of the human being. As man sows seeds in the field of action, so he is the one who reaps the harvest of fresh seeds which promulgate, him into further action. If man is not a free doer, then the very law of Karma becomes absurd. This is a very vital point which we have to understand. The law of Karma does

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not make man just a puppet, helpless under the law. The Hindus say that man suffers or enjoys under the law according to his Karma, and that neither can be escaped.

How can this idea be reconciled with the idea that man has freedom? We have to understand the law in this way: There are dual factors working in each man's life. One is the experience that the individual has to undergo, the pains and pleasures that come to him, the misfortune that he has to suffer and the losses that he has to endure. These experiences are inevitable, and they cannot be escaped. One has to undergo them all. But, there is another factor and that is, the actions the individual engages in. These actions are based upon the will of the individual. Whereas he has no choice in the experiences he undergoes, he

has a choice in the doing of deeds. To this extent, he is a free agent. He may not be entirely free, but for this he need not blame the law. It is because of the many restrictions raised on this earth plane—social restrictions, tradition and etiquette. It is unnecessary to enter into metaphysics at all to prove that man is not a totally free agent, and the law of Karma is there. Man cannot do anything that he wants, but he can exercise his will and in this exercise, man has freedom. He has no freedom, no choice, no alternative regarding life's experiences, but he has choice, he has freedom to a certain extent regarding his will to act.

The actions that operate in the life of every individual soul, according to this law, have been divided into three categories. By

applying the scientific law of cause and effect to the first category, it is seen that in a person's lifetime some activities have effect -immediately, some have effect after a few years, but some perhaps have no effect at all in this lifetime. What happens to actions the effect of which has not been worked out in this life? The potency of such actions accumulates and this accumulated store of re-activity, as it were, of unresolved causes, goes on accumulating and accumulating in each individual's storehouse of Karma. This is one category of seeds of Karma.

The second is, out of these re-active stores, a certain supply is taken out for a particular lifetime to be worked out in the form of sweet and bitter experiences. That forms the seed, as it were, of experiences in

a certain incarnation. This determines man's birth and death and all that he weeps over, all that he suffers and enjoys. All that he experiences, in short, comes out of this store of accumulated Karma. This is the second category.

Now comes the third. In this earth life, man goes on instigating action. He thinks in certain ways and he acts in certain ways and the activity of this particular earth life is contributing towards the formation of fresh seed. Sometime in the future, he has to reap the effect of this activity. To what does this fresh Karma belong? Naturally, it belongs neither to the experiences of this life, nor to the accumulated store. It belongs to a fresh batch, and this is the third category. In it are the activities of the present and it is therefore

referred to as "that which is being done" (Kriyamana). It is also referred to as "that which is to come" (Agami), because that which is to come is actually the product of that which transpires in the present. Thus, there is the threefold Karma: the accumulated store, the experiences chosen for this particular incarnation, and that which is created in this life.

The actions which are done in this life have two distinct effects. One is the effect which is on this earth plane and this effect may be produced immediately or tomorrow, or next week, or in ten years, but the effect which this action produces *on the mind*, is instantaneous. The mind immediately receives the impression of the nature of the action that is done. If a harsh and cruel act

is committed, then the impression of harshness and cruelty is immediately etched upon the mind. Repeated impressions contribute towards the formation of distinct tendencies in the mind and they build up and impart to the mind a particular quality. The sum total of all qualities developed by it, becomes the nature of the individual. It is often called the character of the individual. The outward effect of action is not the main concern of the spiritual seeker, but the impression that it creates in the mind is of vital concern. Why? Because these impressions form the natural bent of the mental being and they indicate what harvest will later be reaped.

Now, the sower has to return to his field if he has to reap his harvest and, in the same

way, man has to return once again to this field of activity, i.e., to the earth plane, in order to reap the harvest of his threefold activity. A clear picture is presented of the soul again and again returning to work out the effect of its activity. As long as the causes of Karma are there, there is a necessity, by law, for them to be worked out. When man finds the way in which to act, so that he does not create any fresh causes, then perhaps, after a series of such lives, the storehouse of Karma would become depleted. And then, in one glorious incarnation he would find himself without any Karma at all at his back. This does not usually happen, because man never allows the pile of Karmas to be reduced. It is ever being added to and that is the great folly of man.

Is this great law a curse or a blessing? It is mixed. Ultimately, it is a great blessedness. People have a tendency to look at it from only one particular angle. That angle is that as long as a human being is bound to the wheel of this law, there is no happiness for him. He is miserable and he weeps. With this view, Karma will always plague him and inflict perennial suffering upon him. But, this is not the all. This law of Karma is not actually just a law of retribution or punishment. There is the other glorious view to be taken of it. Just as man cannot escape the results of his activity which are bad (for this he has to reap tears and suffering), in the same way, he cannot escape his reward. The whole world cannot rob him of his deserved reward. The good actions of

a person will follow him anywhere and will overcome, for him, the greatest difficulty and the greatest sorrow and give to him the harvest of joy.

If properly understood, it is a law which gives infinite hope. It says that man's destiny is in his own hands. It says that he shall depend upon himself. He is the one to decide on the pattern of the experiences to come. No force has any power upon him to coerce him into wrong action. He has to take care of how he behaves, how he acts and what thoughts he thinks. He is the master of his destiny. He is the architect of his fate. He has nothing to fear in this universe, nothing except his own wrong actions and thoughts. He has to say: "Who has the power to give me any experience that I do not choose to select for

myself? No one on earth has the power to injure me, to bring sorrow upon me, to inflict destruction or evil upon me." Thus man takes infinite courage. He is determined to guide his own life into a future containing bliss and radiance. The law gives him an inducement to sow the right type of seeds, and to fashion all his activity along ideal lines.

It is this law which upholds the moral standard of this universe. Had it not been for this law, there would have been no inducement either to avoid evil or to embrace good. Both these lines of action spring out of this glorious law. Man knows that if he does not avoid evil, he will sow weeds and thorns. He knows that he should do good because he will be the blessed enjoyer of the fruits of those good deeds. According to this view, the

law of Karma is not a doctrine of fatalism. On the contrary, it is a doctrine of high orderliness, serving as the basis of the moral order in the whole universe, and the attitude instilled into man by this law is fearlessness. It fills man with fearlessness and infinite courage and a great urge to be ideal, good and lofty in all his thoughts and activities. Man is thus revealed as the builder, having in his own hands the materials out of which he can build whatever he chooses.

Thus, the law ultimately implies that man can free himself from this wheel by consciously avoiding all that brings him back into incarnation, and by filling his life with ideal activities to refine his nature more and more until ultimately a lofty stage is reached where the overall goodness in his life bestows

upon him the knowledge of his real Self. And once he attains to this knowledge, the Law of Karma comes to a halt. Bondage is broken. Why? Through their deep insight into the workings of the law, the Hindus discovered thatg it is inoperative in the realm of the Soul. It is only in the realm of the mind and the body that this law operates.

Man lies within the jurisdiction of this law and remains bound to the wheel as long as he identifies himself with the mind and the body. The moment he breaks this attachment and detaches himself from this false identity, then he utterly destroys this ignorance and realises his transcendence, his oneness with Pure Spiritual Consciousness. The law cannot any longer touch that soul whose life has become illumined with essential knowledge

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that he is neither the body nor the mind, but Pure Consciousness. That is the way of stopping the wheel of Karma.

One thing more I would like to tell you. This law is concerned not only with outward activity, but even with mental activity, for it is thought which is at the root of every action. Thus, every deliberate thought of any kind is actually included in man's Karma, no matter whether it is given any outward physical expression or not. Thoughts held on to by an individual become seeds of such Karma. This has to be understood. In the Gita, we are given a very clear statement of the law. We hear that as long as man continues acting as an egoistic individual, so long will he, casting aside one body, take up another body. It is like regular progression. We, therefore, say

that it is like going to a school in which we progress from grade to grade until the learning process is complete and we graduate from that school. Ultimately, man must attain perfection and then only will he obtain freedom from this law and be liberated. Until that stage is reached, until he learns how to base his actions upon the Absolute and to adopt the pure ideal, he will have to take embodiment again and again.

There are two or three questions about the cosmic form of this law and about the individual operation of it which I will answer now. One is: what is the relation between God, and the experiences and actions of individuals on this earth? We have said that God does not create the experiences of the individual, but that his experiences are

determined by the particular nature that he has acquired.

Now, all life is brought forth on the surface of this earth by the falling of rain and so we may say, in one way and rightly, that it is rain that causes all life. By analogy, no one is responsible for one's life except oneself. Now it also happens that when rain, the universal common factor, as it were, falls and sets life into growth, the life that springs forth is not all the same kind. Wheat sprouts up as wheat, corn sprouts up as corn, and grass sprouts up as grass, and the rain does not have anything to do with it. Within each seed there is an inherent nature which sets different patterns in growth though the rain is common and impartial over the whole of the earth. In the same way, it is the seeds

within one's own nature, implicit in the thoughts that one thinks and the actions in which one engages oneself, which determine the experiences one, will have. According to the mind is the nature of the person determined at birth, and according to the nature are the fresh impressions of life to be received.

The second question I would like to answer is this. In the operation of the law, is there justice? Even though it seems that a doer of good deeds is not reaping happiness and that an evil-doer is very well off, one must know that there is not necessarily any causal connection between the type of life one leads now and the type of experiences one undergoes. Effects are not immediately produced from causes. The activity in which

man is presently engaged may be considered as the fresh seeds he is sowing, whereas the experiences he is undergoing may be considered as the harvest of a previous sowing. There seems to be a contradiction, but actually there is no contradiction. A compassionate and holy person may give succour and refuge to a fleeing criminal; and because he gave shelter to the fugitive, he may himself be arrested and sentenced, not withstanding all his protestations of innocence. People will inevitably jump to the conclusion that this man who acted justly by giving refuge to a fellow human being in distress out of compassion and charity, was yet made to suffer for all his goodness. It looks as though his sentence was the direct outcome of his sheltering the criminal. In

fact, the police will tell you, the judiciary will tell you that because this man harboured a criminal he has been condemned. But, if we look below the surface, we find that the juxtaposition of this good action and the painful experience is only apparent and not real. The kind and compassionate action will be rewarded with blessedness in the future, and the sentence serves as the reaction from some Karma brought forward from the past. The law is very mysterious and we cannot immediately understand all its operations. Its simplest statement is: as you sow, so shall you reap, every cause has an effect, every action has a reaction which is of like nature. This is universal. This operates in all human experiences. Therefore, live wisely in the alert awareness of this law and walk along

the path of right, the path of Goodness. Lead an ideal life and reap a future of Peace and Bliss.

THE GOAL OF LIFE

O man! The Goal of life is God-realisation. God-realisation grants Supreme Joy, Peace and Fearlessness. Most precious is human birth. Utilise this birth to attain God. Life is short. Time is fleeting. Waste not time. Engage in noble deeds. Be up and doing upon the path of Divine Life.

Serve, Love, Give, Purify, Meditate, Realise. Be good; do good. Be kind; be compassionate. Practise non-injury, truth and purity. This is the foundation of Yoga and Vedanta. Adapt, adjust, accommodate. Bear insult; bear injury. Serve all. Love all. Embrace all in the Oneness of the Spirit. This is Divine Life.

Enquire 'Who am I?' Know thy Self and be free. Thou art not this body, not this mind. Thou art Immortal Self. Thou art unborn, eternal, changeless, indestructible, ever-pure, all-perfect Spirit or Atman. Realise this and be free.This is your foremost duty. Do this through selflessness and service, devotion and worship, purification, concentration and meditation. Attain God-realisation. Do it now. Abide in Bliss, Peace and Perfection for ever.

UNIVERSAL PRAYER

O Adorable Lord of Mercy and Love!
Salutations and prostrations unto Thee.
Thou art Omnipresent, Omnipotent and Omniscient.
Thou art Satchidananda
(Existence-Consciousness-Bliss-Absolute.)
Thou art the Indweller of all beings.

Grant us an understanding heart,
Equal vision, balanced mind,
Faith, devotion and wisdom.
Grant us inner spiritual strength
To resist temptations and to control the mind.
Free us from egoism, lust, greed, hatred, anger
and jealousy.
Fill our hearts with divine virtues.

Let us behold Thee in all these names and forms.
Let us serve Thee in all these names and forms.
Let us ever remember Thee.
Let us ever sing Thy glories.
Let Thy name be ever on our lips.
Let us abide in Thee for ever and ever.

—Swami Sivananda

"The births we get here on earth are all products of actions done by us in previous times. Every action has its reaction and no action goes unrewarded in a suitable manner."

—SWAMI SIVANANDA